DEVELOPING SPEAKING SKILL IN ENGLISH THROUGH ACTIVITY BASED LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

In teaching and learning of English, four skills are involved i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and reading are known as the receptive skills; while speaking and writing are known as the productive skills. Ability to speak is the most essential skill since it is the basic for communication. For improving speaking skill, students need lots of practice, encouragement and correction. To stimulate and enhance the students' speaking, some activities need to be carried out in the classroom apart from the traditional practices. Activities help to create interaction in the language classroom. Additionally, communicative activities can motivate the learners and establish good relationships between the teacher and the students as well as among the students thereby encouraging a supportive environment for enhancing speaking skill. The present paper discusses some activities for developing speaking skill in English.

KEYWORDS: Communication, Speaking Skill, Activity based learning.

Speaking is generally thought to be the most important of the four skills in English: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Indeed, one frustration that commonly arises by learners is that they have spent years studying English, but still they cannot speak it. Undoubtedly speaking skill is important in a second language acquisition process:

Speaking is one of the most difficult skills language learners have to face. In spite of this, it has traditionally been forced into the background while we, teachers of English, have spent all our classroom time trying to teach our students how to write, to read and sometimes even to listen in a L2 because grammar has a long written tradition (Bueno, Madrid and Mclaren, 2006: 321).

Comprehending and understanding a language is necessary when students are learning a new language because people always need to communicate and interact with others in different moments or situations in their life.

Communication skills comprise receptive skills and productive skills. Listening and reading are receptive skills while speaking and writing are productive skills. Receptive skills are those in which students receive and process the information but do not need to produce a language to do this, while productive skills require the production, for instance, a speech (Harmer, 2007: 246)

Furthermore, the student is in a social, cultural and linguistic context where the English language is not often present and he/she does not need it to interact and survive in his/her life. For most people, the ability to speak a language is synonymous with knowing that language. Nevertheless, "speaking in a second or foreign language has often been viewed as the most demanding of the four skills" (Bailey and Savage 1994: 7). The most difficult aspect of spoken English is that it is always accomplished via interaction with atleast one other speaker and this is one reason why many of us were shocked and disappointed when we used our second for the first time in real interaction. We had not been prepared for spontaneous communication and could not cope with all of its simultaneous demands. Speaking is an "activity requiring the integration of many subsystems…all these factors combine to make speaking a second or foreign language a formidable task for language learners…yet for many people, speaking is seen as the central skill" (Bailey and Savage 1994: 6-7). There are numerous daily life situations where people need speaking, such as talking to someone face to face, communicating through the phone, answering questions, asking for directions, in shops, meetings or chatting with their friends, to name a few. People spend great deal of their time interacting with more people and, each of these situations requires a different register according to the formality of the moment.

We speak for many reasons - to be sociable, because we want something, because we want other people to do something, to do something for someone else, to respond to someone else, to express our feelings or opinion about something, to exchange information, to refer to an action or event in the past, present, or future, the possibility of something happening, and so on (Lindsay and Knight, 2006: 58).

Harmer. J. also explains that "when speaking, we construct words and phrases with individual sounds, and we also use pitch change, intonation, and stress to convey different meanings" (2007: 29). This skill is the most complicated due to the fact that speakers have to interpret not only the message that other speakers try to express, but also take into account other possibilities explained in the following quotation:

Speakers have a great range of expressive possibilities at their command. Apart from the actual words they use they can vary their intonation and stress which helps them to show which part of what they are saying is most important. By varying the pitch and intonation in their voice they can clearly convey their attitude to what they are saying, too; they can indicate interest or lack of it, for example, and they can show whether they wish to be taken seriously. At any point in a speech event speakers can rephrase what they are saying; they can speed up or slow down. This will often be done in response to the feedback they are getting from their listeners who will show through a variety of gestures, expressions and interruptions that they do not understand.

And in a face to face interaction the speaker can use a whole range of facial expressions, gestures and general body language to help to convey the message (Harmer, 2007: 53).

When speakers are talking, they must also pay attention to gestures, intonation, stress or even pauses that other speakers are doing because are clues to understanding the meaning of what they are trying to say.

Many English teachers claim that the best way to acquire speaking skills is by interacting. This purpose can be achieved by means of communicative language teaching and collaborative learning. Communicative language teaching is based on real-life situations that require communication. There will be opportunities for the students to communicate with their peer group in the target language. It is teacher's task to create situations in class where students have real-life communication, activities related to their daily life and meaningful tasks that give them the chance to practice oral language. Speaking is usually the most problematic skill to teach because, apart from its difficulty, teachers do not have much time to concentrate on this skill. Teachers should monitor each activity carefully and give specific feedback if students have done well or if they have any errors. According to Lindsay and Knight:

Learners need encouragement and they need to know when they are making mistakes that might cause other people not to understand or misunderstand them. Teachers should also use the opportunity to praise learners for getting something right, doing something well, trying hard, and showing a positive attitude towards learning. This could be when they produce an accurate sentence, do an amusing role-play, make an interesting contribution to a discussion, or show that they can use a new item of vocabulary. It is more difficult to decide when to correct. Teachers can choose to correct as soon as the mistake is made or at the end of the activity or class. The advantage of immediate correction is that the learner can correct the error and use the corrected language for the rest of the activity. The disadvantage is that it can break the flow of communication and possibly demotivate or embarrass the learner. (2006: 68)

According to the classroom context, teachers will try to choose the most adequate activities to be put into practice, and which Lindsay and Knight offer a huge variety:

Speaking activities that concentrate on getting learners to produce sounds, phrases or grammatical structures range from activities, which are controlled by the teacher to activities where the learners have more freedom to choose the language, they use. Controlled activities generally focus on the learners producing language accurately, while less controlled activities focus on developing the learner's fluency.

In active based learning students are active learners not the passive receivers. Activities can create curiosity in learners and this will lead to an interest towards learning of speaking in English. It has advantages as it appeals to a wide range of different senses and also appeal to individual's varied learning styles. Different activities can be identified and can be tried in the skills thereby increasing the students' interest in learning process. The Activity Based Learning plays a key role in developing the critical and creative mind of students. Activities help the students to reinforce the speaking skills in their mind and also later relate them into real life situations. The role of the teacher now is of a facilitator. Innovative methods are employed to make learning more interesting. The activity-based learning methods allow the learners learn in an optimum environment as Nunan (1995) has described Activity Based Learning as "a range of work plans which have the overall purpose of facilitating language learning from the simple or brief exercise to more complex or lengthy activities". Activity-based language teaching has many purposes. Willis (1996: 35–6) identifies eight purposes:

1. to give learners confidence in trying out whatever language they know;

2. to give learners experience of spontaneous interaction;

3. to give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meanings;

4. to give learners chances for negotiating turns to speak;

5. to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively;

6. to make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences;

7. to give learners chances to try out communication strategies; and

8. to develop learners' confidence that they can achieve communicative goals.

The teacher should design communicative activities/tasks so that he/she directly or sometimes indirectly improves the learners' pronunciation as well as speaking skills. The dialogues, mini-conversations and different role plays using the variety of different daily situations for learners according to their linguistic level to practice particular sounds, especially those which are not available in their mother tongue. Pronunciation while participating in different role plays, mock debates, group discussions, rehearsal strategies and cover strategies will help the learners to develop their pronunciation and to know how the different sounds are pronounced by other individuals to attain standard frequency and pitch in pronunciation and give the impression that their pronunciation is better than it really is. In relation to the activities in order to develop the speaking skill, there are many ways to promote oral skills in the classroom. The following mentioned activities are the most typical speaking activities:

Group discussion and debate are probably the most common activity in the oral skills class. A selected topic is given to the students through a reading, a listening passage or a video clip and is then, in pairs or groups; they discuss the chosen topic in order to come up with a solution. Students will be more involved with and motivated to participate in discussions if they choose the topics in relation to their likes and dislikes. They may aim to arrive at a conclusion, share ideas about an event, or find solutions in their discussion groups. Before the discussion, it is essential that the purpose of the discussion activity is set by the teacher. In this way, the discussion points are relevant to this purpose, so that students do not spend their time chatting with each other about irrelevant things. For example, students can become involved in agree/disagree discussions. In this type of discussions, the teacher can form groups of students, preferably four or five in each group, and provide controversial sentences like 'people learn best when they read vs. people learn best when they travel'. Then each group works on their topic for a given time period, and presents their opinions to the class. It is essential that the speaking should be equally divided among group members. At the end, the class decides on the winning group who defended the idea in the best way. This activity fosters critical thinking and quick decision making, and students learn how to express and justify themselves in polite ways while disagreeing with the others. For efficient group discussions, it is always better not to form large groups, because quiet students may avoid contributing in large groups. The group members can be either assigned by the teacher or the students may determine it by themselves, but groups should be rearranged in every discussion activity so that students can work with various people and learn to be open to different ideas. Lastly, in class or group discussions, whatever the aim is, the students should always be encouraged to ask questions, paraphrase ideas, express support, check for clarification, and so on.

Another common activity in the oral skills class is the extempore, elocution or speech. Extempore is a speech that is delivered with little or no preparation. Topics for speeches will be different depending on the level of the students and the focus of the class. For example, asking students to 'tell us about an unforgettable experience you had' allows them to talk about something that is personally meaningful while at the same time encourages narration and description. Speeches can be considered frightening for the speaker and, after a while, boring for the listeners, so it is a good idea to assign the listeners some responsibilities during the speeches

One other way of getting students to speak is role-playing, which is particularly suitable for practicing the socio-cultural variations in speech acts, such as complimenting, complaining. Students pretend they are in various social contexts and have a variety of social roles. Depending on the level of the students, role plays can be performed from prepared scripts, created from a set of prompts and expressions or written using and consolidating knowledge gained from instruction or discussion of the speech act and its variations prior to the role plays themselves. In role-play activities, the teacher gives information to the learners such as who they are and what they think or feel. Thus, the teacher can tell the student that "You are David, you go to the doctor and tell him what happened last night, and…" (Harmer, 1984)

On a given topic, students can produce ideas in a limited time. Depending on the context, either individual or group brainstorming is effective and learners generate ideas quickly and freely. The good characteristic of brainstorming is that the students are not criticized for their ideas so students will be open to sharing new ideas.

Students can briefly summarise a tale or story they heard from somebody beforehand, or they may create their own stories to tell their classmates. Story telling fosters creative thinking. It also helps students express ideas in the format of beginning, development, and ending, including the characters and setting a story has to have. Students also can tell riddles or jokes. For instance, at the very beginning of each class session, the teacher may call a few students to tell short riddles or jokes as an opening. In this way, not only will the teacher address students' speaking ability, but also get the attention of the class. On another hand story completion is also very enjoyable, whole-class, free-speaking activities for which students sit in a circle. For this activity, a teacher starts to tell a story, but after a few sentences he or she stops narrating. Then, each student starts to narrate from the point where the previous one stopped. Each student is supposed to add from four to ten sentences. Students can add new characters, events, descriptions and so on. Students can conduct interviews on selected topics with various people. It is a good idea that the teacher provides a rubric to students so that they know what type of questions they can ask or what path to follow, but students should prepare their own interview questions. Conducting interviews with people gives students a chance to practice their speaking ability not only in class but also outside and helps them becoming socialized. After interviews, each student can present his or her study to the class. Moreover, students can interview each other and introduce his or her partner to the class. Before coming to class, students can be asked to read a newspaper or magazine and, in class, they report to their friends what they find as the most interesting news. Students can also talk about whether they have experienced anything worth telling their friends in their daily lives before class.

Students can be asked to tell the story taking place in the sequential pictures by paying attention to the criteria provided by the teacher as a rubric. Rubrics can include the vocabulary or structures they need to use while narrating. Another way to make use of pictures in a speaking activity is to give students just one picture and having them describe what it is in the picture. For this activity students can form groups and each group is given a different picture. Students discuss the picture with their groups, and then a spokesperson for each group describes the picture to the whole class. This activity fosters the creativity and imagination of the learners as well as their public speaking skills.

To make learning interactive and interesting, considerable emphasis should be given to activities in which learners use the language they have learned to communicate with each other. Along with the other methods the abovementioned activities can be used not only to enhance the speaking skill of students but also to assist them in gaining confidence for further formal oral discourses.

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